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ABSTRACT

The ways contemporary American journalists view themselves and order their experiences in their autobiographies stem from the reporter-as-celebrity phenomenon. As a result of this phenomenon, many journalists are writing their autobiographies when they are fairly young, and creating larger-than-life personas of themselves, which tends to emphasize the entertainment aspect of their story, and obscure any historical significance. The reporters often rely on "war stories" and nostalgia, and perpetuate such myths as reporter-as-Superman, the deification of objectivity, news instinct, and reporter-as-skeptic. Most, but not all, reporters' autobiographies are arranged chronologically, such as Dan Rather's, Harry Reasoner's and Jessica Savitch's, and contain universal elements such as "paying your dues" and discovering a mentor. Such a format seems to preclude the type of reflexivity found in Studs Terkel's and Harrison Salisbury's autobiographies. Terkel presents his experiences in the order in which they were recalled, and Salisbury infuses his narrative with a tone of self-doubt. Most journalistic memoirs fail particularly in their tendency to be too nostalgic, and hence come across as self-fulfilling acts designed to perpetuate image and myth, lacking any connection between the journalist and genuine human experience. (JC)

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THE JOURNALISTIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY: HOW REPORTERS VIEW THEMSELVES AND ORDER THEIR EXPERIENCE

by

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Abstract

In this era of the reporter as celebrity, many journalists are writing their autobiographies long before retirement. A rags-to-riches storyline often is used in these memoirs, leading to a recipe approach to autobiography. War stories are the typical ingredients, including such characteristics as the Superman Syndrome, nostalgia, objectivity as gospel, news instinct, and the skeptical reporter. Many of these memoirs tend to come across as self-fulfilling acts that perpetuate image and myth.

Introduction

Journalism is an activity open to a wide range of interpretation. Films, television, and plays tend to romanticize the role of journalists in society, creating mythic images to satisfy the entertainment requirement of these genres.[1] Surveys by media watchdog groups often label journalists as arrogant and unethical, while surveys sponsored by journalistic organizations and trade publications portray reporters as misunderstood or unappreciated public servants.[2] Sociology, meanwhile, views reporters as participants in the social construction of reality. From the sociological perspective, journalists order reality through subjective experience or societal preconceptions.[3]

Journalists also seek to offer interpretations of themselves and their positions through autobiographies. While this quest for self-positioning long has been displayed in journalistic memoirs, an increasing number of contemporary American journalists are writing their autobiographies early in their careers.[4] This seems to be a direct result of the reporter-as-celebrity phenomenon that can be traced to the hero worshiping of Edward R. Murrow. Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, whose Watergate exploits spawned a best-selling book and a hit movie, represent the highwater mark of this phenomenon. Reporters today are granted a legitimation that frees them from the anonymity and obscurity of the journalistic trenches. Some reporters have become the subject of news stories, as evidenced recently by Sam Donaldson, ABC's White House correspondent, who made headlines by tossing a snowball at House Speaker Jim Wright. Other reporters discuss their careers on talk shows and on the lecture circuit.

The reporter-as-celebrity concept is rooted in a cultural phenomenon

where the development of communications has increased the illusion of intimacy with the celebrated. In an effort to make sense of the competing stimuli produced by the information explosion, people seek simplifying symbols that crystallize and personify life.[5] People latch onto media-created symbols that conveniently categorize good and evil, truth and falsity, in a world where the lines between such extremes have become blurred. In the 1970s, Woodward and Bernstein became media-created symbols of honesty triumphing over corruption, as well as symbols of "the system" working despite the presidential crisis. As part of this process of personification, the public developed an intimacy with the two young reporters to the extent that "Woodstein" became a household word. The public internalized Woodward and Bernstein, unconsciously making them a part of its own consciousness.[6]

As Richard Schickel points out, this illusion of intimacy with celebrities extends to the point where "we know what makes them tick, which makes us want to tick as they do."[7] This fantasy relationship between the celebrity elite and the anonymous mass hinges on the public's perception that stardom equates with near-perfect freedom. Schickel observes that this autonomy is admired because being one's own boss fulfills the American Dream of private entrepreneurship. In the corporate age, he adds, celebrities appear to have no permanent institutional allegiances: "All such are temporary, the length of the film they are making ... or the television contract under which they are laboring. And the more successful they become, the less dependent they are on the corporations that order the lives of the rest of us."[8]

Society's preoccupation with celebrities is reflected in the gossipy content of media fare. <u>People</u> magazine has proved to be very

prosperous, and it has spawned its imitators. The number of newspaper interviews with celebrities continues to rise, particularly in the life-style and arts sections. On television, "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" takes a voyeuristic journey into the homes of the elite, while the celebrity interview has become the trademark of such programs as "Today," "Good Morning, America," "The Tonight Show," "Entertainment Tonight," and "20/20."[9] Joan Rivers, meanwhile, has transformed "The Late Show" into the electronic equivalent of People and the National Enquirer.

In the culture of celebrity, the people making the news are not the only ones in the spotlight; it is being shared by those who cover the activities of the celebrated. Journalists have become more reflective about what they do for a living, recognizing more than ever before the power and prestige they command. An outgrowth of this consciousness of self-importance is the spate of journalistic autobiographies that have flooded the market, many of which chronicle careers barely at the half-way mark.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the ways contemporary American journalists position themselves in the world in their personal narratives. In what ways do journalistic autobiographies order life experiences? How do reporters who are not afraid to engage in aggressive, hardball reporting fare when turning the light of scrutiny on themselves? Is journalistic myth perpetuated in these memoirs, or do they provide a forum for the demystification of journalism? Finally, are these autobiographies primarily solipsistic works, or are they narratives of human and cultural significance?

Six autobiographies are examined in this paper: In Search of History:

A Personal Adventure by Theodore H. White; A Journey for Our Times by Harrison E. Salisbury; The Camera Never Blinks: Adventures of a TV Journalist by Dan Rather, with Mickey Herskowitz; Anchorwoman by Jessica Savitch; Talking to Myself: A Memoir of My Times by Studs Terkel; and Before the Colors Fade by Harry Reasoner. These books reveal diverse backgrounds, but all reflect the reporter-as-celebrity phenomenon. Although the reporters wrote their memoirs at varying stages of their careers, they did so presumably with the conviction that their life stories were worth sharing with society. In the era of the celebrity, reporters tend to view themselves not only as witnesses to history as it unfolds, but as professionals whose coverage of history has made a difference. For Rather and Reasoner, their coverage of the Vietnam War helped mold a public perception that something was terribly wrong in Southeast Asia. For White and Salisbury, their work helped educate Americans about the complexities of presidential politics and Soviet-American relations, respectively. For Savitch, her work emphasized the important contributions women can make in broadcast journalism. For Terkel, his oral histories and world travels reveal the interconnectedness of people, regardless of occupation, race, or nationality.

The ways journalists tell their life stories reveal recurring narrative patterns. The autobiographies primarily are structured chronologically or by distinct stages, providing a formulaic narrative approach that utilizes a rags-to-riches premise for story development. Components of this premise are "paying your dues" and the mentor. The memoirs of Terkel, White, and Salisbury, however, show efforts to go beyond the recipe approach to autobiographical writing by experimenting with textual possibilities.

Journalistic war stories are the mainstay of these personal narratives, serving as an extended displaying of credentials by the reporter as celebrity. Common characteristics of these war stories include the Superman Syndrome, nostalgia, the deification of objectivity, news instinct, and the reporter as skeptic. Although war stories could be dismissed as a literary device that panders to an entertainment-hungry audience, more importantly they reflect the ways journalists choose to view themselves in the culture of celebrity.

Narrative Patterns: The Journalistic Autobiography as Formulaic Ritual

The fascination with the autobiography as a literary genre lies in the recognition that because no two people are exactly alike, each autobiographical account will offer unique life experiences. The formulaic approach to contemporary journalistic memoirs, however, could call this quality of uniqueness into question. In Patterns of Experience in Autobiography, Susanna Egan points to the tendency of autobiographers to engage in literary reductionism by categorizing life experiences under the headings of "childhood," "adolescence," "middle age," and so forth.[10] The narrative structures of journalistic autobiographies often are chronological to a fault, utilizing the technique of dividing life experiences into distinct stages. Categorizing human experience this way is the recipe approach to writing autobiography. Instead of experimenting with ways to bring lived depth to narrative surface, the writer follows a recipe that rigidly spells out which "ingredients" should be used, and in what order. When journalists order their life experiences in such fashion, the result is the personal narrative as formulaic ritual. If life is basically an experience of spontaneity and improvisation, then

the recipe approach becomes all the more ironic. Although human experience attests to the unpredictability of life, the obvious outcome of formulaic narrative style is predictability.

The memoirs of Rather, Savitch, and Reasoner rely heavily on ordering experience through the conventional methods of chronology and distinct stages. Rather's The Camera Never Blinks and Savitch's Anchorwoman begin their chronological remembrances at the high school years, while Reasoner's Before the Colors Fade elects to use the author's first job in television news in 1954 as the starting point.

Characteristic of this chronological ordering of experience is a rags-to-riches premise, which includes a "paying your dues" component. Paying your dues is the unwritten code of the news industry. The journalistic axiom of starting out in a small market in order to learn all aspects of the business emerges as a thematic thread running through these memoirs. Paying your dues pragmatically becomes an apprenticeship situation where the journalist learns the craft, and idealistically involves the building of character. In describing a weekend radio announcing job she held as a teenager in Pleasantville, New Jersey, Savitch provides a typical example of the trial-and-error nature of paying your dues:

> I was not only the announcer, newscaster and record-spinner, I was the engineer, transmitter-reader and remote-broadcast technician. The latter category gave me some trouble. One hot summer day, instead of throwing the correct combination of levers to present the listeners with the dulcet tones of the Ray Freeman Pool Party at Atlantic City's Deauville Hotel, I somehow managed to assault them with the pre-taped air raid emergency alert. Fortunately, before southern New Jersey had its own version of Orson Welles' "War of the Worlds," program director Mike Elliott burst in and untangled the technical snafu.[11]

Another component in this rags-to-riches narrative structure is

the mentor. Typically, this is the person whom the author credits with having made a major difference in his or her life. Without the training, support, and advice of the mentor in the early years, the journalists maintain they would not be King of the Hill today. As Rather observed:

> The dream begins, most of the time, with a teacher who believes in you, who tugs and pushes and leads you on to the next plateau, sometimes poking you with a sharp stick called truth. Mine was named Hugh Cunningham and he taught journalism in 1950 at Sam Houston State Teachers College. ... How Hugh Cunningham happened to wind up there ... I do not know. But it was a break for me. Otherwise I would not have lasted in college longer than three weeks and most likely would not have gone on to whatever career I have had.[12]

Similarly, Reasoner credits Fred Friendly, former president of CBS News, and Roone Arledge, president of ABC News, with having a profound affect on his professional life: "What these two men have in common is the attribute of great natural force; those whose lives they have touched were frequently never quite the same again."[13]

Although this reliance on chronology, distinct stages, and a rags-to-riches storyline make for an easy read, these techniques limit the journalistic autobiographer to a tunnelvision approach to ordering experience in text. In many ways, the narrative strategies of autobiographers emulate those used in films about the news industry. Both narrative styles rely on a formulaic approach that romanticizes the role of the reporter. "The Front Page," the classic play by Charles MacArthur and Ben Hecht, set the narrative tone for cinematic accounts of the world of journalism. A recipe-style narrative structure is employed in these films, with a common ingredient being a wise-cracking newspaperman

who insults his bosses and is irreverent to editors, politicians, police, advertisers, publicity seekers, and female reporters.[14] In this formula, reporters are portrayed as cynical, glib, jaded, and larger than life in their roles as muckrakers and fearless crime solvers.

Another ingredient in the narrative recipe of journalism films is the use of language and behavior as identifying symbols or cliches. In Stop the Presses: The Newspaperman in American Films, Alex Barris observes that fictional journalists tend to nip frequently at whiskey bottles stashed in bottom desk drawers; treat "pimple-faced copy boys like retarded slaves"; dictate by telephone flawless lead paragraphs to unseen rewrite men; tell their bosses how the paper should run; threaten to quit the news business and take a cushy public relations job; sniff out scandal and solve baffling crimes; go to outlandish lengths to scoop their rivals; and manage to find telephones in the unlikeliest places in time to call the city desk and shout the inevitable cliche, "stop the presses." Barris notes that these identifying symbols include visual cliches as well: the bank of presses rolling; the bundle of tied newspapers being dumped off the truck and landing on the sidewalk, enabling moviegoers to read the dramatic headline; the news vendors hawking the paper on the street corner; and the over-the-shoulder shot of the front page being read by the underworld boss who vows revenge against the meddling reporter.[15]

A journalistic philosophy also emerges from these cinematic narratives: anything goes to land a story. Barris observes that in the Hollywood version of newsgathering, "any means were justified, any deceit pardonable, any extreme understandable." He notes that fictional editors share that philosophy, perpetuating the journalistic myth that any number of hours worked by a reporter in pursuit of a story should

be regarded as in the line of duty.[16]

The irony of the mythology perpetuated in these films is that former reporters often serve as the screenwriters. Whereas other segments of society can fall back on standard defenses about Hollywood distortions, reporters are saddled with the knowledge that their movie image was invented by their own colleagues.[17]

It seems a large measure of experimentation in narrative style is needed to retrieve both journalistic autobiographies and films from the cycle of mediocrity. The lack of reflexivity about how reporters do their work places a creative straightjacket on these books and movies, creating a reliance on cliche and mythology.

Countertendencies: Narrative Experimentation and Reflexivity

While the autobiographies of Mather, Gavitch, and Reasoner reflect a formulaic approach to ordering life experience, Terkel, Salisbury, and White experiment with narrative strategies. Terkel's Talking to Myself proved to be the boldest experiment by avoiding chronology and distinct stages, replacing those techniques with a spontaneity found in the author's oral history interviews. While Chapter Five recalls a memory from 1975, Chapter Six returns to 1926, to be followed by a chapter focusing on a 1962 interview with Bertrand Russell. Terkel's technique of capturing life experience on the tape recorder obviously is a key factor in the way he orders experience. Instead of arranging the taped memoir in a chronological or distinct-stages structure, Terkel chose to present experience as it was recalled. As Terkel says early in his memoir: "I tape therefore I am."[18]

Terkel's personal narrative also stands apart from other journalistic autobiographies in the author's ability to scrutinize his own psyche and motives as a recorder of history. This reflexivity is evident throughout much of the book, with the afterword serving as a moving testament to Terkel's difficulties in making sense out of today's complex, troubled, and materialistic society. He observes: "The young -- and that goes for the rest of us, too -- have only a dim sense of the present, let alone of the future. It is because we have no sense of the past. We have lost our sense of history."[19] Terkel's reflexivity also is apparent in his anecdote about speaking before college students who were staunch Ronald Reagan supporters. His speech focused on entrenched corporate power and the unresponsiveness of public servants in contemporary society, with the 1930s, the Depression and World War II serving as the historical framework. At a cocktail party following the speech, Terkel confronts the students' desperate lack of historical perspective and their narcissistic preoccupation with the present. "In any event," he concludes in resignation, "history is about yesterday. Today is what it's all about."[20]

Although Salisbury's A Journey for Our Times and White's In Search of History rely on ordering experience through chronology and distinct stages, the books offer a reflexivity uncharacteristic of many journalistic memoirs. Salisbury infuses his narrative with glimpses of self doubt concerning his career and his personal life. In discussing his arrival in London as a United Press reporter during World War II, Salisbury wondered how "a bumpkin from Minnesota" could cope with the "Cambridge polish" of the government officials he would interview. He wrote that he was "painfully, fiercely shy about meeting these people,"

adding that only "my fierce ambition enabled me to go through these torments."[21] Salisbury went on to express his guilt over having left familial obligations in Minnesota to pursue a career as a foreign correspondent: "I was agonized by a conviction that I would never see my father again. I wrote, gently suggesting that he retire, but I knew this was only an exercise to spare my conscience. ... When I thought of these things (and I did constantly), I knew that I should never have come to London. But the next moment I was telling myself how much I had riding on London. ... London was the road to my future, the path to making a name for myself ..."[22]

Salisbury's reflexivity also is evident in a discussion of his tenure as a young wire service reporter in Chicago during the Depression. Salisbury was in "seventh heaven" to be a reporter in the city of gang wars and Al Capone, and he wrote letters in "Ben Hechtese" to friends in Minnesota explaining his excitement. The author, however, reflected on a moment when the dreams of a novice reporter collided with reality: "One Sunday I walked down South Michigan to Twenty-third Street, hoping to see Al Capone come out of his bulletproof headquarters in the Metropole Hotel, where he received supplicants like a pope, extending his diamond-studded pinkie to courtiers. But he didn't emerge and I didn't have the courage to go into the hotel. I walked back to the Berkshire ashamed of my cowardice ..."[23]

The fullest expression of Salisbury's reflexivity surfaces in his realization that Chicago during the 1930s was more than bright lights, fast times, and flashy gangsters. Instead, Chicago during the Depression was a city whose inhabitants hoped "there would be no tomorrow because tomorrow would be a worse today, a colder today, a hungrier today, more

desperate."[24] The author's reflexivity enabled him to explore beyond the journalistic bravura that occupies much of the personal narratives of contemporary reporters. In so doing, the reader gains a clearer understanding of historical reality, as well as insight into Salisbury's maturing process.

Like Salisbury, White's reflexivity paints a more humanistic portrait of the journalist by expressing moments of uncertainty and vulnerability. At one point, White states that he is "as wary of friendship with the great as a reformed drunkard of the taste of alcohol." Yet, White acknowledges that Chou En-lai, Joseph Stilwell, and John F. Kennedy were "three great men" in whose presence "I had near total suspension of disbelief or questioning judgment."[25] The author's vulnerability particularly comes across in his account of how working as a young reporter in Asia in the early 1940s dramatically changed his life:

> The reader must remember now how far I had come from home. I had learned to drink. I had had my first experience in bed with a woman and that was behind me. I knew I had been for months eating nonkosher food, but always tried to delude myself that the meals I ate were lamb, beef or chicken. This habit was my last link to family practice. I was still so pinned to my Jewish tradition that to eat pig outright seemed a profanation.[26]

White's narrative also scrutinizes the sometimes less-than-noble techniques he used to land a story. White learned that combining the words "collapse" and "government" in a lead could make journalism sound like history, leading to a front-page story. He said that journalists "hunt where space on the front page invites them, trying to flush out of the tumbling of affairs an understandable, disposable event" that their editors will run.[27]

White's most reflexive moment in his autobiography emerges in a

discussion of the life and death of John F. Kennedy. The journalist conveys the pain and turmoil he felt as he interviewed Jacqueline Kennedy a week following the assassination. Mrs. Kennedy repeatedly told White that her husband equated history with heroes, and that she hoped the epitaph on the Kennedy administration would be the legacy of Camelot. White subsequently filed a story for Life magazine that emphasized the Camelot metaphor. He did so not to placate Mrs. Kennedy, but because he was convinced that history should remember JFK as a hero. As White put it: "I had given unquestioning loyalties to all too many men, as one does when one is young, and I would give guarded affection to several more in years to come. But I would never again, after Kennedy, see any man as a hero. A passage of my own life had closed with a passage in American politics."[28]

The reflexivity exhibited by Terkel, Salisbury, and White elevates the journalistic autobiography to a level of significance not achieved by recipe-style narratives that avoid experimentation. Obviously, some autobiographers consider narrative experimentation to be an obstacle on the way to the best-seller list.

Characteristics of Journalistic War Stories

Journalists enjoy telling a good story, whether in a news article or over beers at the local newspaper bar. As Gay Talese pointed out, reporters are people who seek the unusual in life, recognizing it is the uniqueness that is the stuff of good storytelling. For journalists, normality is their nemesis.[29] This compulsion to tell a good story is underscored in the personal narratives of reporters, where war stories are trotted out in rapid-fire fashion in an effort to legitimize the work

through the displaying of credentials.

The weakest of the journalistic autobiographies are those that concentrate on the way the reporter covered the story, rather than examining the social, cultural, or political significance of the moment in history being recorded. White and Salisbury are among a handful of journalistic autobiographers who present anecdotes within a historical context. For example, White transformed a discussion of his exploits as a reporter covering postwar European politics into a poignant statement about Germany's attempt to sever itself from the ghosts of the past. He recalled that he would travel to Germany twice a year to sample "political tissue for traces of Nazism." The new German Republic consisted of what White termed "the dullest group of politicians I had ever encountered," but the author understood that such dullness was symptomatic of a country that "had known too much excitement and experienced too much history." White said this phenomenon represented "a shrinking away of a people from its past."[30]

In describing his postwar adventures as a New York Times correspondent covering the Soviet Union, Salisbury also succeeded in placing anecdotes within a historical framework, thus achieving meaning instead of simply entertainment. Salisbury observed, for example, that few people in the United States understood the destruction that had taken place in Russia, and that he lacked the words to express the devastation. "No one in New York understood when I told them I had not met a Russian man or woman who had not lost a wife, a son, a mother, a loved one, in the war," Salisbury wrote. "They had no measure by which to understand and I was not skillful enough to find a way to carry it home."[31]

Terkel's memoir partially succeeds in bringing forth historical

significance from anecdote, especially in his accounts of covering the Freedom Movement march in Alabama in 1965, and the Chicago riots during the 1968 Democratic National Convention.[32] With no small measure of imagery, Terkel illustrates what he means when he calls Chicago of August 1968 a "battlefield":

> We are huddled, refugees, a good fifty of us on the safety island in the middle of Clark Street. Sirens are sounding. The whole city, it seems, is possessed by the wailing of banshees. Nobody is in his right mind. Cars are racing past. We see the faces of the occupants. They are crazy with fear. Of us. One car deliberately swerves toward the island, on which we hover. I see the driver's face. It is distorted. Hate and terror. Of us. His hand is on the horn; stuck to it. Noise and confusion. We cry out.[33]

The autobiographies of Rather, Savitch, and Reasoner, however, rely heavily on war stories designed to entertain more than enlighten. While Rather succeeds in underscoring the historical significance of race consciousness in the section detailing his coverage of the civil-rights movement in the early 1960s, his account of covering the assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas reads like journalistic melodrama.[34] As Rather put it: "What I kept thinking was this: We are ahead on the story. I wasn't yet considering the human and national tragedy behind it. Right or wrong, I was thinking about the story."[35]

A recurring theme of the war stories in Savitch's book emphasizes the discrimination women face in the male-dominated television news industry.[36] Apart from that theme, the anecdotes in Savitch's memoir exist primarily for purposes of entertainment. The following passage from her book illustrates the point:

> When I was anchoring in Philadelphia, I had to elbow my way into a space at the first floor public lavatory mirror. Unfortunately, my pre-5:30

> news cleanup coincided with the assembling of the audience for the Mike Douglas Show, taped in the adjoining studio. Every day, with just a few minutes to go before air time, I slapped on makeup and sprayed my hair at the washbasin -- surrounded by a fascinated audience of women.[37]

Reasoner's autobiography is a loosely constructed collection of anecdotes, with the changes in the television industry over the years serving as the slender thread binding them together. A disproportionate number of Reasoner's anecdotes focus on his dealings with network executives, stripping the book of historical significance by concentrating on contract talks and personality conflicts.[38]

A prevalent element in the use of war stories in post-Watergate era autobiographies is the Superman Syndrome, where journalists recount their adventures in a larger-than-life manner. Rather's The Camera Never Blinks carries the Superman Syndrome to the fullest extreme, especially in the section concerning his Vietnam War reportage. Rather tells of pleading with a CBS executive in 1965 to send him to Vietnam because the "war is becoming the most important story of this generation. I want to see it, report it."[39] Immediately upon his arrival in South Vietnam, Rather persuades a Marine officer to allow him and his cameraman to be flown by helicopter to a war zone. The author explained his behavior this way: "It was as if my inner clock had gone haywire. I couldn't slow myself down. I had rushed pell-mell to get to Vietnam, to find out where things were happening, and to get wherever the action was. All in the first twenty-four hours. I have no idea what I thought I had to prove, if anything, but I knew I had some catching up to do."[40]

After Rather and his cameramen join a Marine patrol on a search-and-destroy mission, they get pinned down by Viet Cong fire. "Because the gunfire was continuous," Rather wrote, "I was afraid to raise up the

four inches or so that would be required to roll over on my belly. Sounds silly now. But four inches could be the difference between getting and not getting hit."[41] Despite the close call in his first Vietnam assignment, Rather unsuccessfully tries to talk his cameraman into staying overnight in the area of the attack. "I was not trying to be hardheaded," Rather asserted, "but I had just arrived on the scene and wanted a little more taste of what combat was about."[42]

Reasoner, who also covered the Vietnam War as a television reporter, echoed Rather's fascination with combat by stating that "given a choice between going ahead and interviewing President Thieu the next day ... or going to some other battle scene by helicopter, I might very well choose the fight, terrorized instantly after the decision, but absorbed. Nothing is so completely absorbing as combat except unusually rewarding and intimate passion ..."[43]

The accounts of Rather and Reasoner diving in and out of foxholes during Viet Cong attacks are typical examples of the tendency of journalistic autobiographies to rely upon melodramatic narrative techniques that cast the reporter in the distorted role of Superman. The Superman Syndrome is not so much the result of deceit on the part of autobiographers, as it is a reaction to the perceived public expectations of how reporters cover their stories.

Like journalistic memoirs, Hollywood movie scripts also tend to endow reporters with superhuman qualities. Barris maintains that because most realistic films about journalists have failed at the box office, Hollywood gives the public what it wants -- the reporter as crime buster and crusader. "A hero, after all, must behave like a hero; he can't hold the viewer's attention by sitting around rewriting handouts," Barris notes.[44]

Plots involving reporters who out-sleuth the police are a favorite in journalistic films. By the mid-1930s, movie audiences were inundated with stories of omniscient reporters who spent most of their time outwitting inept police officers.[45] A typical example of the reporter as super sleuth is the 1941 film, "Nine Lives Are Not Enough," starring Ronald Reagan as a boastful reporter-photographer who not only always gets his story, but his man as well. "On the strength of my story and my story alone, he's behind bars," Reagan's character brags to his colleagues in an early scene. Barris points out that Reagan, hot on the trail of a murder story, "is not above removing distributor caps from the cars of rival reporters and even policemen to allow him to keep ahead of everyone else."[46]

The basic premise of the reporter-as-crusader film hinges on the notion that the job of the journalist is more than simply gathering facts; instead, it entails going to great lengths to right social injustic The early 1950s became what is regarded as the Golden Age of crusading journalists in movies, where exposing political corruption, investigating organized crime, or proving the innocence of a convicted man were recurring plots.[47] A prime example of this genre was "The Turning Point," a 1952 film with William Holden as a hard-boiled newsman dedicated to exposing a local crime syndicate. Holden learns that even the policeman father of an idealistic prosecutor is involved with the racketeers. Holden shifts gradually from cynic to crusader, and eventually turns martyr when he goes after the crooks himself.[48] "Deadline, U.S.A.," meanwhile, is considered to be one of the best crusader films. This 1952 film directed by Richard Brooks starred Humphrey Bogart as a reporter trying to save his newspaper from being sold to a rival paper. Bogart's

efforts prove futile, but throughout the film he delivers impassioned pleas for the existence of competitive newspapers.[49]

Another characteristic of war stories in the autobiographies of contemporary journalists is nostalgia, where the past is idealized from the perspective of an inadequate or troubled present. Reasoner's memoir is especially nostalgic in tone, as illustrated in his observation that television news today places too much emphasis on what transpires in Washington, D.C. "Since the trend is to do more and more in Washington," he wrote, "and maybe even place the news headquarters there, I am at best a voice crying in the wilderness and at worst a gaffer mumbling in my beer about the good old days. But I admit it: in the mumbling I sometimes think that ... we did it better then."[50] Reasoner's tendency toward nostalgia also is underscored in his commentary about young reporters in the television news industry:

> They are so damned competitive and ethnically and sexually balanced and so delighted with the new toys that enable them to be on the air first with some story no one should be expected to care about. I blame the colleges, partly; so many of them took broadcast journalism out of journalism and put it in something called a 'Communications' major, turning out people who knew all about how but not what to communicate.[51]

In the afterword of his autobiography, Terkel maintains that the 1980s has become the decade of the zombies. He longs to return to an age when Americans were humanists and not corporate robots. "I see stone-cold Keir Dullea in the film 2001," Terkel wrote. "Or for that matter, HAL, the computer. And we're only in the eighties."[52]

Journalistic war stories also reveal a uniformity in the autobiographers' assessment of objectivity as gospel. This is certainly no revelation, considering most of the authors are products of journalism

school, where objectivity remains an unchallenged concept. Many of these personal narratives lack the reflexivity that calls the notion of objective reporting into question. Terkel, in fact, is one of the few autobiographers to acknowledge the precarious nature of objectivity. This recognition surfaces in his discussion of covering the 1968 Chicago riots: "Here, it appears, the ghost of 'objective' journalism is being once and forever laid."[53] Still, Terkel's reflexivity remains the exception. Reasoner's observation that the "great single qualification for a good reporter is detachment"[54] is the prevailing view.

News instinct emerges as another characteristic of war stories, where some indefinable inner sense directs a reporter toward a story that is difficult to uncover. Although journalistic autobiographers acknowledge that experience on a beat will hone news instincts, a lot of credence still is put in the old saying that a successful journalist needs "a nose for news." Rarely are words like "luck" or "hunch" used; such words lack the romanticism that is engrained in the news business. Rather's autobiography particularly employs the concept of news instinct in relating war stories. He observes that such instinct also enables reporters to act without hesitation during moments of chaos or peril:

> There is something that kicks over inside you -- like the omni on an airplane where you switch on the remote control -- on a certain kind of story that causes the adrenalin to pump so strong you are acting almost purely by instinct, by training. ... When the moment comes you do those things you are trained to do automatically.[55]

A final characteristic of war stories focuses on the notion that healthy skepticism is a vital aspect of reportage. Reporters usually are quick to distinguish between cynicism and skepticism, with the latter finding the reporter taking nothing for granted, yet remaining

sensitive. Rather says Watergate changed his outlook as a newsman, noting that "I am far less likely now to give any official spokesman the benefit of the doubt." Rather acknowledges that cynicism is a counterproductive approach to reporting, but adds that skepticism is essential: "And what I try to do is give myself a very heavy injection of skepticism every morning before I go to work. A triple dose, now."[56]

Although Reasoner asserts there is strong evidence that "everything seems to be going to hell," the broadcast journalist prides himself on remaining skeptical and avoiding cynicism. Reasoner says he remains optimistic because as Americans "we ought to be able to make some sense out of what we're doing, and stop the worst of it, and limp along."[57]

Conclusion

The ways contemporary American journalists view themselves and order their experience in their autobiographies stem from the reporter-as-celebrity phenomenon. Because the development of communications has increased the illusion of intimacy with the celebrated, American society worships at the altar of stardom. To the public, being a celebrity means entrepreneurial freedom, or the fulfillment of the American Dream. Celebrities also serve as symbols that simplify an increasingly complex and dangerous world. For example, Clint Eastwood, Sylvester Stallone, and Chuck Norris personify strength, control, and rugged individualism. The shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later style in the films of Eastwood, Stallone, and Norris offer the public simplified solutions to the difficult problems of terrorism, skyjackings, organized crime, serial killers, and soldiers missing in action in Southeast Asia.

Within this culture of celebrity, journalists also have commanded

the public spotlight. In some cases, how a reporter lands a story is of more public interest than the story itself. For Woodward and Bernstein, the culture of celebrity not only made their names household words, but bestowed upon them folk-hero status as well. In this climate of notoriety, a number of reporters are writing their autobiographies long before retirement.

War stories have become the measuring stick in determining a reporter's significance and worth in these autobiographies. Reporters, after all, are professional storytellers; they feel compelled to make their own lives as exciting as today's headlines. An obvious consequence of this reliance on war stories is the perpetuation of nostalgia and such journalistic myths as the reporter as Superman, the deification of objectivity, news instinct, and the reporter as skeptic. In an era where some journalists are as famous as the celebrities they write about, the tendency exists to exaggerate the claims of "I'll do anything to get my story." To look at the situation another way, perhaps the pressures on journalistic autobiographers are such that their thinking is, "I'll do anything to tell a good story." While some journalistic gaffes are acknowledged, most of these memoirs are testaments to doing the right thing at the right time.

Most journalistic autobiographers believe their coverage of history as it unfolds has made a difference. The inherent contradiction, however, is that many of the war stories in these memoirs lack sufficient historical significance. Instead, they simply read as anecdotes told for the sake of self-aggrandizement, rather than stories revealing a larger historical truth. Of the autobiographies examined in this study, only the works of White and Salisbury are consistent in utilizing war stories within a historical context.

Along with perpetuating journalistic myth and nostalgia, the reliance on war stories also stifles the reflexivity that would provide the reader with insight into the reporter's decision-making process. Covering news often requires making moral and ethical decisions under intense deadline pressure. Instead of memoirs dealing only with the surface texture of anecdotes, it would prove more compelling to analyze the motives behind the news decisions. Such reflexivity would go a long way toward dispelling the reporter-as-Superman myth.

The narrative structures of most of these autobiographies rely on chronology and distinct stages to order experience. Utilizing a step-by-step formula to relate human experience leads to a paint-by-numbers approach to autobiography. Typically, the formula involves a rags-to-riches premise for story development, complete with such components as paying your dues and the mentor. A rags-to-riches storyline orders life experience with a tidy beginning, middle, and end. Ultimately, however, such a storyline rings hollow in a world where chaos and indecision are the stuff of everyday life. Instead, narrative experimentation is needed to bring the journalistic autobiography down from the clouds and onto a realistic plane. This will require a reflexivity missing from most contemporary memoirs.

The ultimate failing of journalistic memoirs is the tendency to pay homage to the past, instead of attempting to gain a firmer understanding of the present and providing direction to the future. In what Janet Varner Gunn calls the autobiographical situation, the self's impulse to find meaning in the world of human experience looms large. This autobiographical impulse is shaped by bringing lived depth to language and displaying it as narrative surface. The self displays, not distorts,

itself by means of language. The reader's interpretation of the displayed self is the autobiographical response, which involves the fusion of horizons of understanding between the text and the reader. Here, the reader experiences autobiographical text as an occasion of discovery, seeing in the text the unexpressed depth of the reader's self. As a poetics of experience, autobiography is a human and cultural act taking place in a common world of shared experience and significance.[58]

Autobiographies of contemporary American journalists, unfortunately, tend to come across as self-fulfilling acts designed to perpetuate image and myth. In the process, the quest for self-identity and self-enlightenment takes a back seat. This is the quest that Gunn describes -- the search for the self's relationship in the history of human experience. If these memoirs are to become what Gunn calls true autobiography, the experiences being shared must go beyond the ability to tell a charming story; instead, they require the revelations of meaning and significance.

Notes

[1]Recent film examples include "All the President's Men," "Absence of Malice," "Under Fire," "The Mean Season," and "The Killing Fields." Television portrayals of the news industry include "Lou Grant" and a widely criticized crime-reporter show in 1987 called "Hard Copy." The classic play about newspapering is "The Front Page."

[2]For surveys concerning the professional attitudes, beliefs, and values of journalists, see Weaver and Wilhoit (1986), pp. 104-145.

[3]See, for instance, Altheide (1976) and Schudson (1978).

[4]Savitch (1982, p. 11) explains why she decided to write her autobiography at age 34.

[5]Schickel (1985, pp. 28-29).

[6]Ibid (p. 4).

[7]Ibid (p. 29).

[8]Ibid (pp. 255-256).

[9]Ibid (p. 15).

[10]Egan (1984, p. 3).

[11]Savitch (p. 18).

[12]Rather (1977, p. 25).

[13]Reasoner (1981, p. 8).

[14]Harris (1976, pp. 12-13).

[15]Ibid (pp. 20-21).

[16]Ibid (p. 14).

[17]Ibid (pp. 18-19).

[18]Terkel (1984, p. 8).

[19]Ibid (p. 334).

[20]Ibid (pp. 318-319).

[21]Salisbury (1983, pp. 178-179).

[22]Ibid (pp. 179-180).

[23]Ibid (p. 100).

[24]Ibid (p. 110).

[25]White (1978, p. 118).

[26]Ibid (p. 110).

[27]Ibid (pp. 326-327).

[28]Ibid (pp. 518-523).

[29]Salese (1981, p. 1).

[30]White (p. 319).

[31]Salisbury (p. 285).

[32]For discussion of Freedom Movement march, see Terkel (pp. 263-295). Concerning coverage of the 1968 Chicago riots, see Terkel (pp. 193-213).

[33]Ibid (pp. 199-200).

[34]For coverage of the 1960s civil-rights movement, see Rather (pp. 65-107). For coverage of President Kennedy's assassination, see Rather (pp. 111-129).

[35]Ibid (p. 122).

[36]See, for instance, Savitch's discussion of a lack of female role models in the television news business (p. 21), along with her observations concerning myths about women in the industry (pp. 40-41).

[37]Ibid (pp. 74-75).

[38]Reasoner (pp. 157-159).

[39]Rather (p. 105).

[40]Ibid (p. 137).

[41]Ibid (p. 138).

[42]Ibid.

[43]Reasoner (pp. 135-136).

[44]Harris (p. 22).

[45]Ibid.

[46]Ibid (pp.41-42).

[47]Ibid (p. 85).

[48]Ibid (p. 87).

[49]Ibid (pp. 93-95).

[50]Reasoner (p. 42).

[51]Ibid (p. 169).

[52]Terkel (p. 320).

[53]Ibid (p. 196).

[54]Reasoner (p. 98).

[55]Rather (p. 121).

[56]Ibid (p. 235).

[57]Reasoner (pp. 204-205).

[58]Gunn (1982, pp. 3-28).

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